# Cultural Expressions of Dalits by S.A .Samy

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to analyse three issues. The fist part is explaining the meaning of Dalits and about he caste hierarchy in India. The second part deals with the socio economic and political conditions of the Dalits .Finally analysing the various forms of their artistic expressions for a comprehensive understanding of their culture.

## Who Are Dalits?

The word 'Dalit(a)' comes from the Sanskrit - root 'dal' - and means 'held under check' ,'suppressed', or 'crushed', or, in a looser sense, 'oppressed'. Dalits are communities of the people deprived of all that are needed to lead a normal and dignified life as human beings. The Historical exclusion of Dalits from the main stream of the Indian society has been done systematically for various reasons. They are institutionally deprived of their civil.political.economic.social.and cultural rights in every aspect of life. Dalits number approximately 240 million in South Asia and more than 160 million of them live in India. (Survey conducted by the National Sample Survey in 2000).

The major reason for the suffering of the Dalits is due to the Indian caste system that classifies them as untouchables.

To be born a Hindu in India is to enter the caste system, one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. Embedded in Indian culture for the past 1,500 years, the caste system follows a basic precept: All men are created unequal.

## MYTH AND ORIGIN OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

1. **The BRAHMINS**, the priestly class came from the head of God. They are eligible for learning and teaching and perform sacrifices. The others cannot teach and perform sacrifice.
2. **The KSHATRIAS**, the warrior class came from the shoulder of God. They are eligible for learning. Their work is to protect the people by waging war against the enemies.
3. **The VYSIAS,** the trading class came from the thigh of God. Their work is to trade and feed the above two classes.
4. **The SUDRAS**, the servants came from the feet of God and their work is to do all menial works to the above three classes. They are not entitled to learn anything.

Other sub-castes are more than 3000 in number, with the "Untouchables" or “Dalits" at the bottom and outside. They are the slaves of the above groups and they are absolutely forbidden to learn and teach.

The code of conduct that deprives them of these rights was written three thousand years back. One may wonder why this is still in practice. The tragedy is that although untouchablity was abolished by law 1950 in India, yet the Dalits experience the agony of untouchability very deeply in all walks of life: Social, Economical and Political. One cannot understand the pain of being a Dalit unless he experiences it.

**How equal are the Dalits, socially and economically?**

Today, Dalits make up **16.2% of the total Indian population**, but their control over resources of the country is marginal, less than 5%. Close to half of the Dalit population lives under the Poverty Line and even more (62%) are illiterate. Among the Dalits most of those engaged in agricultural operation are landless or near landless agriculture labourers. The total household income for Dalits was of Rs. 17,465 in 1998 a mere 68% of the national average. Less than 10% of Dalit households can afford safe drinking water, electricity and toilets, which is strikingly indicative of their deplorable social condition. Moreover, Dalits are daily victims of the worst crimes and atrocities, far outnumbering other sections of society in that respect too, and in spite of the many cases that go unreported for fear of further retaliation. Between 1992 and 2000, a total of 3,34,459 cases were registered nation wide with the police as cognisable crimes against Dalits. After 57 years of Independence it is but evident that **India is still very much afflicted by the cancer of the caste system.** Dalits remain the most vulnerable, marginalized and brutalised community in the country.

Characterized as untouchables, they are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and higher-caste groups

Condemned to labouring in the fields of high-caste families in return for a subsistence diet, millions are undernourished and exploited by landowners, officials and moneylenders.

In many Indian village teashops in which Dalits are still forbidden to drink out of the same glasses used by people of high caste. In certain villages they are prevented from ‘contaminating’ entire streets by being forbidden to walk in shoes or ride bicycles. Even after getting independence from British in some village Dalits were not allowed to have doors as the land lords could enter any time to force and enjoy the women.

Dalits have historically been allocated occupations that are considered demeaning or polluting by others - an estimated one million Dalits are manual scavengers who clean public latrines and dispose of dead animals and 60% of Dalits are dependent on casual labour. Literacy rates too present a bleak picture with only 37% of literate Dalits

To be a Dalit today means having to live in a subhuman, degraded, insecure fashion: **Every hour, two Dalits are assaulted. Every day, three Dalit women are raped, and two killed. In most parts of India, Dalits continue to be barred from entering Hindu temples or other holy places** - although doing so is against the law. Their

women are banned from wearing shoes in the presence of caste Hindus. Dalit children often suffer a form of apartheid at school by being made to sit at the back of the classroom.

**Reservation Policy- can it redeem Dalits?**

The Reservation policy of the government could not be benefited fully by the Dalits that their poverty ridden conditions do not allow their children to go for higher education. Education has been crucial in shaping life of Dalits and taking them out of the morass of traditional caste based occupation .but so far educated Dalits have been joining government /organised sector jobs was facilitate through reservation and affirmative action policies. The potential for absorption in this sector of employment is going to be small in future .the existing employment is going trends also point a bleak future for unskilled and less skilled labour .but there will be demand for skilled labour on account of technological development. The share of Dalit students receiving professional training is at the negligible level of 3.74%.presicely for this reason the number of jobs even within the government and the organised sector continue to remain vacant because suitable Dalit candidates with recognized and professional / technical qualifications are not available.

As per 1991 census 62.52.59 Dalits are illiterate and 79.88 Dalits are illiterate and 79.80 Dalits School children drop out by middle level. While the situation has improved in 2001 still about half of Dalits may be illiterate and as many Dalit children may be dropping out before completing middle level

Many of the legislative measures have not benefited Dalits to any appreciable extent. In fact, sincere and strict implementation of laws relating to land reforms, particularly the land ceiling law, which aims to distribute surplus land to the landless, would have greatly enhanced the socio-economic conditions of Dalits who constitute a substantial proportion of the agricultural labour.

Above all the discriminations and injustice done to them the physical assault and violence is vital problem they face through out India.

"The violence takes brutal forms and turns into acts of atrocities against a whole group of people, such as massacre, rape, burning of houses and through more subtle methods like social boycott, which are intended to block their access to basic necessities and services."

Dalits are denied access to land; their legitimate and traditional fishing rights in ponds are taken away; they are denied access to roads and often their living space, the Cheri on the outer fringes of the village, is encroached upon by the `caste Hindus'; their access to clean drinking water is virtually non-existent and their wells are often poisoned during anti-Dalit riots; the majority of Dalits are agricultural labourers with low wages and long stretches of unemployment —.

However, these deprivations and discriminations are not just economic; they are also social, cultural and political. Illiteracy among Dalits is very high and this is exploited in more ways than one. . There is a delicate line of social behaviour, transgression of

which brings in immediate and often brutal reprisals. Smoking in front of `caste Hindus' or walking in the main part of the village wearing chappals can invite violence. But the most brutal forms of reprisal — including `honour killings' of the couple by `caste Hindus' — seem to be reserved for inter-caste marriages involving a Dalit.

**Dalits –Do they have political freedom?**

The discriminations are also political in nature. Often their right to vote is taken away through violent means; in some cases there is violent reprisal — by the police — because Dalits decide to boycott elections in protest. In elected panchayats with reservations for Dalits, elections are either not allowed to be held, or, when held elected Dalit panchayat members are not allowed to function. In some cases, the denial of these rights has taken the form of murder of Dalit panchayat members. Political rallies by Dalits are not allowed to take off or severely restricted.

There is very little solace for a Dalit in religion or even in death; various types of discriminations continue in these spheres. The religious rights of the Dalit — to worship — are often severely restricted. And the burial grounds for Dalits often lack proper approach roads and attempts to reach these grounds through land belonging to `caste Hindus' often invite reprisals.

The fact that Dalits have to face such deprivation, discrimination, and violence — in all their intensity and range — from `caste Hindus' is perhaps explicable in terms of the central role caste plays in our society. But these articles also bring out the role — more often than not, nefarious — played by various organs of the state in this. The police have often been brutal in their dealings with Dalits.. The administration has been insensitive, to say the least. Atrocities against Dalits and instances of Dalit assertion are treated essentially as law and order problems, not social ones.  the devious ways in which the administration tries to scuttle various programmes and measures instituted by the State for the benefit of Dalits .

T o conclude the various atrocities against the Dalit people we can look in to a case in which the judgement was as follows.

FOUR years after the murder in broad daylight of K. Murugesan, president of Melavalavu panchayat in Tamil Nadu's Madurai district, his brother Karuppaiah, vice-president Mookkan and three other members of the panchayat, all Dalits, justice has run its course. On July 26, 17 of the 41 accused were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment by the Principal District and Sessions Judge of Salem, A.S. Ramalingam. The court acquitted 23 of the remaining accused. One of the accused died during trial. The case was transferred to the court in Salem from the Madurai Sessions Court on orders from the Madras High Court.

The massacre, which took place on June 30, 1997, was widely viewed as a stark instance of caste Hindu violence against Dalits in Tamil Nadu . The victims were pulled out of a bus and hacked to death. Murugesan's head was cut off and thrown into a well 400 metres away from the spot of the murder.

The incident, seen also as a manifestation of upper-caste intolerance of Dalit empowerment, marked the culmination of a series of protests by sections of caste Hindus in Melavalavu against the 1996 government notification reserving the panchayat for Dalits. Initially, Dalits, who mostly depended on caste Hindu landholders for their livelihoods, were threatened with a social and economic boycott. Dalits who filed their nominations had to withdraw in the face of threats from caste Hindus and the elections were rendered in fructuous. When elections were held later, booth-capturing necessitated a re poll. Although Murugesan was elected president, he was not allowed to function as one. Accompanied by the vice-president and other members of the panchayat, he went to Madurai and submitted a petition to the District Collector seeking protection so that they could discharge their duties. The attack took place on their way back to Melavalavu village.

**Do Dalits have a culture?**

Dalit history reveals that the Dalit community had a rich culture of its own. Here, Dalits who are the children of the soil found ways of expressing their identity through folk arts and classic arts in oral and written forms. But these rich cultural treasures were stolen from them by oppressors. Their cultural heritage was desecrated and destroyed and a foreign culture was imposed upon them. The upper caste oppressors saw to it that the Dalits would never produce a culture of their own.. The others ingeniously used the art form and the various traits of their culture to oppress and dehumanize the Dalits.

Thus culture which is supposed to give a meaning system and value system to a society was made into an instrument of oppression and domination. This manipulation of culture to dehumanize the Dalits has continued down unabated through the centuries even till today.. The Dalits have neither the money power nor the political clout to make their voices heard. It is the upper caste that determines what the Dalits should think and how he should act and how he should see his status in the society.

By the use of electronic media and the print media, the upper caste society has successfully preserved its dominance and has tried to convince the world that the so-called low caste people are indeed low people. What is even more outrageous is the attempts to make the Dalits themselves believe and accept that they are low and worthless only to be despised and cast out to become the outcastes.

.Despite the prejudice of people of high caste, those at the gutter level of the Hindu hierarchy is reclaiming their music. It is becoming a source of powerful resistance, the basis of new and revolutionary identities. As Dalit women come together to share and find solutions to their problems at meetings of self-help groups in villages throughout India, they learn that they are not to blame for their individual problems. They become ‘conscientized’ – in the term coined by Paolo Freire, the Brazilian revolutionary educator – to the fact that their problems are rooted in an oppressive social structure. With this realization comes a new sense of self and community as they band together to fight for fair wages, access to clean water, electricity and land rights. Their cultural expressions reveal how they are longing to break hierarchies, articulate aspirations that are political and economical.

Important characteristics of all the traditional lore that has been transmitted for centuries together in the forms of **oral narratives, songs, music, tales, proverbs myths, legends, ballad, lullabies, Field songs, performing arts are as follows.**

a) **Explaining the agony and the sorrow of their life styles.**
b) **Trying to communicate to their community members in a subtle way**
c) **Seeking consolation for the sufferings.**
d) **Expecting a change that will liberate them.**
e) **Directly or indirectly call for the unity among them.**

In the state of Tamilnadu there were local Dalit heroes among the Dalit communities. These individuals either man or women would have tried to counter the dominance of upper caste people and got killed in doing so. These individuals become a hero and in due course the Dalits make them as their gods. There are many ballads sung in praise of these heroes. These ballads will express their anger and in the same time induce the new generation to take up the role of the deliverer. The ballads will begin with the details of birth and family details .Good qualities of the hero will be brought out and the cause of his death will be mentioned and sadness will prevail at the end with highlighting the loss of the hero.

As landless labourers the Dalit women will sing in the paddy fields while transplanting the seedlings .Every day life situations will be represented in their songs. Mocking the landlord satirically can be noticed in their songs. Those mocking elements may not be easily understandable for an outsider whereas it is communicated for enjoyment among the labourers. Fear prevents them from making direct mockery.

The lullabies sung by the Dalit women express the state of their lively hood to their infants. Asking the babies to sleep the main lyrics of those lullabies will be of explaining to the child that it has entered in to a inhuman system of living where there is only sorrows and sufferings. It will curse the fate of birth and blame the god for allowing the child to grow in the unjust system. She will weep with the child narrating the bad situations of her life.

Mostly all forms of traditional cultural expressions are derived out of their day to day living conditions. Whether it is ritual or non ritual they recorded the ordeal of Dalits and longed for the attention of their own communities as well as others.

**Dalit Artist -Pride or Insult?**

An individual or a community's identity ,attitude and patterns of behaviour are formed and expressed in the forms of arts and aesthetics is not merely by the environment, in which one is part of ,but importantly developed visa –a vis attitudes of significant others. It is this significant others that play a crucial role in the formation of one's identity. In other words an individual's self understanding and estimation would not develop in vacuum. It rather develops in mutuality of interaction and essentially depends on others treatment. With this understanding we can look in to the pride and dignity of the Dalit artists. For many educated Dalit youths believe that practicing of Dalit art forms bring shame and insult to their identity. The art folk drumming in pan Indian scale is connected mainly to Dalits and tribal communities. Since the folk drums are made out cow skins this art form was considered as some

thing low and impure by the upper caste people. Here we have to note that the upper caste people do not eat beef and consider Dalits as beef eaters. Hence the art of folk drumming was predominantly used with funeral processions. But the modern day political processions and temple festivals and other types carnival use this art choreographed to suit to different occasions.

**Drumming –A tool for liberation?**

The emergence of Dalit liberation movements and other Dalit political parties and NGOs working for the upliftment of Dalits have given a new impetus for the art of drumming. Drumming for a social change is the new way of expressing their art form in various festivals held in India .No more it is considered as funeral music but music of liberation. The vibrations that it brings help them to arouse their feelings of agitation and recording their expression through their cultural resource. This folk drumming has the tremendous effect of crowd pulling at public meetings and gatherings.

Their singing, drumming, strumming and dancing are re-defining their perspective. On the other hand alternative communication like third theatre, street theatre, puppet show, etc., is also widely spreading. Dalit's search for alternative media is in fact the search for a counter-culture that will stand as a paradigm to protect human existence; re-write history and evolve a new culture of love and caring. Let this be a historical milestone from where we reiterate our march towards equality and justice, self-respect and harmony.

**Some of the Dalit Art forms in Tamilnadu**

**Paraiyattam or Thappaattam**

The most striking and vibrant art form is the folk dance known as paraiyattam or thappattam in Tamilnadu.

The Parai acquired the name Thappu based on the action of beating on the instrument Parai. Thappu is always associated with beats and its dance. The uniqueness of Thappattam is that both the player and the dancer are same. The beats of the Drum and the movements of the body meet in unison so as to become an expressive dance form. Unfortunately the higher caste people invite Thappattam only for the funeral processions. But as for as the suppressed community is concerned Thappattam is an art form which extends from a birth of a child to the death of a man or woman.

Thappattam is played at each and every auspicious functions of a family like child's birth, puberty, marriages and the worship of the community deities. The pattern of the beats of Drums varies according to its performance in an auspicious occasion and funeral ceremony. This has made an impact on the Socio-Cultural realm of Tamil Nadu, so much so that Thappattam has become a center of focus of the Modern Theatre practioners, creative dancers, cultural nights, cultural exchange programmes and cultural studies.

The rhythm builds in intensity as the listeners break into a spontaneous dance of Dalit pride as they celebrate the drum's message – that theirs is a culture and a political force to be reckoned with. Once a symbol of the degradation of the Dalits, the parai drum has become a potent weapon in the struggle against casteism.

Many young Dalits how ever, prefer to play modern brass band drums covered with synthetic skins. The deeply internalized shame about the degradation associated with cow skin still remains.

'There has been hesitation amongst young people to use traditional drums. They use modern drums, but now Dalit leaders make propaganda: "This is our culture, our music; young people should come forward to play the pari drum."' Dalits still use their traditional drums at funerals – a key means for them of earning a living. However, the drums are increasingly used to lead processions of villagers campaigning to win local elections for their own candidates. Hence no more it is funeral music but it has become their own music.

## Karagaattam

Karagam is a folk dance with musical accompaniment, performed balancing a pot on the head. Traditionally, this dance was performed by the villagers in praise of the rain goddess Mari Amman and river goddess, Gangai Amman, performed with literature with water pots balanced on their heads. In Sangam literature, it is mentioned as 'Kudakoothu'. This dance has two divisions - one, Aatta Karagam and the other 'Sakthi Karagam'. More often it is danced with decorated pots on the head and is known as 'Aatta Karagam' and symbolises joy and merriment. The former is performed only in temples, while the latter is mainly entertainment in nature. This is one of the more popular rural dances today. Earlier it was performed only with accompliment of the Naiyandi Melam but now it includes songs also.

Karagams were once performed for mulaipari ceremony when the dancer carried a pot of sprouted grains on his/her head and danced, balancing it through intricate steps and body/arm movements. Today, the pots have transformed from mud pots to bronze ware and even stainless steel in modern times. The pots are decorated with a cone of flower arrangements, topped by a paper parrot. The parrot rotates as the dancer swings along.. This dance is danced by an individual or two persons. Both male and female performers participate in this. Acrobatics similar to circus are included - such as dancing on a rolling block of wood, up and down a ladder, threading a needle while bending backwards and so on. Mainly the dancers are from Dalit community though very few others have learnt this art form.

### Oyillattam

Oyil = grace, aesthetic gestures, and aattam = dance, so oyilaattam is the dance of graceful gestures. It is performed by young men and women of the village in the open in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu,. The dancers dress uniformly, either in coloured costumes or with white shirts/kurta and kachcham. Their costumes include a dark coloured sash (cloth belt) around their hips, a coloured turban on their heads, a coloured piece of cloth in their right hands and bells tied on their feet. This is a linear type of dance, in which twelve to twenty persons stand in a row and perform the

dance to rhythmic music with forward movements, swinging their hands forward and backward coupled with intricate foot work. It is also practiced by the other sections of the village communities.

**Jimpla Melam**

Jimpla is a percussion instrument. It is also known as Cimpla melam, Cimpla kottu and Erudhu kottu melam. This is like a thavil, but short in appearance. This instrument is accompanied by the Kattai kuzhal. So this is also known as Katta nayanam or Sattha kuzhal.

This art is performed by the Arundhati caste people during festival time. The performers wear banian and dhoti. They start with slow tempo and ends with fast tempo. Two beats played by the hand and two beats played by the sticks.

**Periya Melam**

Periyamelam is a traditional art form of Tamil Nadu. The troupe playing Periamelam, consists of 7 to 10 members. They wear colourful costumes. The artists play music themselves and also dance simultaneously. The Periamelam dance is performed mostly during festival times and rituals. The dancers not only play the big drums but also dance vibrantly according to the music of their instruments (Melams). Hence this dance is called Periamelam

**Naiyandi Melam**

Naiyandi melam is a musical performance with a fast tempo played generally on instruments such as Nagaswaram, Thavil, Pambai, Thamukku, Jalara and some times on Shehnai. This music is usually performed as an accompaniment to folk dances such as Kavadi, Karagam, Poikkal Kudirai, etc.

**Conclusion**

Social organisations who are working for a change are beginning to explore the possibilities of using both traditional and contemporary Dalit art forms in educating the masses .Especially the use of street theatre has gained momentum in the last two decades for creating awareness among the people about the atrocities committed against Dalits.In the state of Andra Pradesh the powerful folksinger Mr.Kathar attracts millions and millions of people to listen to his songs that speaks about the unjust system. Cultural liberty is a human right and an important aspect of human development – thus worthy of state action and attention.

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Note:

The author of this paper Mr.S.A. Samy works as the Director of **Centre For Culture and Development**, a non profit organisation based in Chennai. The Centre is promoting a cultural space near Madurai Known as **Kalaigramam** with the mandate of Pro-poor .Pro-women, Pro-nature and pro-livelihood and Pro-Dalits. Generating awareness, Skill building, Livelihood security to the poor is addressed with the utilisation of cultural resources.

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